

Chickens—our language is filled with references to their behavior. People are called “chicken” when afraid, “henpecked” when nagged, and our problems are said to “come home to roost.” But despite their prominence in our language, chickens have little going for them in the public eye.

Chickens don’t gaze at us soulfully or wriggle with joy; they express emotions more subtly, through a rich variety of calls and postures. To a casual observer, their movements can appear mechanical, even comical. Because of chickens’ apparent lack of similarity to companion animals, it can be hard to relate to the suffering of a laying hen crowded into a wire cage, unable to spread her wings. But if people knew more about the true nature of chickens, I think we would see a resounding public outcry over their mistreatment on factory farms. Their future depends on new public appreciation of the hen: she is not unlovable or emotionless, but a thinking, sensitive, and complex creature.

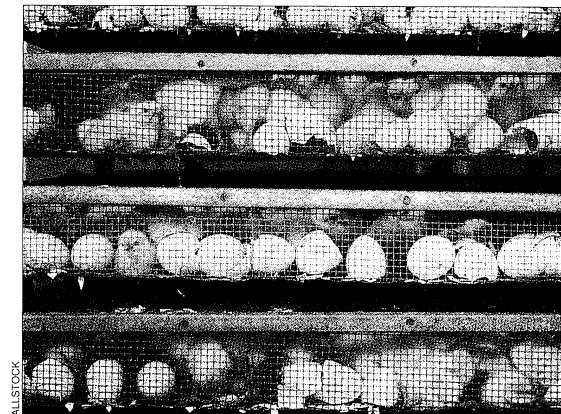
A chicken can recognize and remember about 100 other chickens. Chickens enjoy playing with toys, preferring balls with faces over plain balls. Some chickens like listening to classical music (Vivaldi, in particular) while others cuddle up to red mittens for comfort. Knocking on the door before entering a small henhouse will keep hens from being startled by a visitor. These are but a few examples of the interesting nature of laying hens.

The chicken was brought to America by the Pilgrims. Descended from the red jungle fowl of Southeast Asia, the modern laying hen is very similar to her ancestors in general behavior. When allowed to roam freely, hens are extremely active during the day—walking, running, flying, exploring, and searching for food. At night they roost together, preferring to perch high off the ground. Their reputation as “chickens” may be due to their response to predators—running or flying away when disturbed, sometimes freezing or crouching.

Chickens are inquisitive animals and will closely investigate anything new in their environment. Hens like to work for their food. Even if food is readily available, hens choose to spend a large part of their day exploring for food and scratching and pecking at the ground.

Chickens are very social animals and form tight social groups. Groups of birds tend to dust-bathe (a grooming behavior) and eat to-

A massive, four-tier house for laying hens is typical of today’s intensive-confinement battery-cage operations. *Above:* newly hatched chicks begin life crowded in incubator cases. The females are destined for lives as assembly-line egg-laying machines; the males are killed.



# THE TRUTH BEHIND “A HEN’S LIFE”



gether. They communicate with each other through visual displays and calls. The baby chick begins communicating while still inside the egg, responding with positive chirps to the mother's purring as she incubates the egg. Once hatched, the chick "imprints" on the mother hen, maintaining a permanent, close relationship with the hen as he/she matures.

Nesting is extremely important to laying hens. They prefer to lay their eggs in a private nest, and they perform an elaborate sequence of behaviors while searching for a nest site, building the nest, and laying eggs.

Laying hens have a well-developed nervous system and are sensitive to touch, temperature, and pain. They also have excellent vision and see a color range similar to that seen by humans.

It is hard to imagine less appropriate housing for the highly social, complex, and active laying hen than "battery" cages. These cages, made entirely of wire, are so small and cramped that the hens cannot even spread their wings. About 98 percent of all eggs sold in supermarkets come from hens who spend their entire produc-

tive lives—up to two years—crowded into tiny cages with other hens.

To limit the damage from the aberrant excessive pecking of cagemates in this restrictive and barren environment, part of the hen's beak is removed, a practice termed "debeaking." A hen's beak is crucial for preening, exploring, and feeding; debeaked chickens show behavior changes suggestive of not only short-term but also long-term pain. The severed nerve endings in the beak develop into abnormal nervous tissue, and the beak never heals properly.

A hen's nesting desire is so strong that she will go without food and water to be allowed to use a nest when she's ready to lay. Deprived of nests, hens in battery cages pace anxiously and repeatedly attempt to escape for two to four hours prior to laying an egg. Without privacy or nests, they lay their eggs on the sloping wire floor on which they are forced to stand. These birds are bred to be egg-laying machines, continuing to lay normally even when severely injured. They typically lay 230 to 280 eggs a year.

Hens suffer foot and feather damage from poorly designed wire cages unsuited to their needs. The wire floor doesn't allow dust-bathing, or scratching, or pecking at the ground for food, and the cramped quarters do not even permit normal preening. The complete lack of exercise, coupled with the demands of high egg production, causes bone weakness, predisposing the hens to broken bones.

About 20 percent of laying hens are subjected to forced molting. Typically food is withheld for up to twelve days (water is usually withheld for one to three days). This shock treatment causes almost all the birds to molt rapidly at the same time instead of at their natural pace, so that, when they recover, their productive life will have been extended.

Considered "spent" after twelve to twenty-four months in battery cages, hens are pulled out of their cages, stuffed into crates, and sent to slaughter. Laying hens suffer especially high rates of death and injury during this ordeal. Many are transported great distances in open (uncovered) trucks, completely exposed to the elements and deprived of food and water. During handling and transport, large numbers of these hens (68 percent in one study) have their weakened bones broken.

The final act of cruelty to the hens is slaughtering them without prior stunning to render them unconscious. The battery cage is the cause of this cruelty, as well: the hens' weakened bones would fracture during stunning. Fully conscious, hens are

shackled upside down on a conveyor and their throats are cut by an automated knife. Then they are dropped into a scalding tank. The birds are supposedly dead when they go into the scalding tanks, but in a European study, 30 percent of chickens were still alive when they were dropped into the tanks.

The flesh from "spent" laying hens is so bruised and damaged that it can be used only for foods such as soup, pot pies, or pet food. These hens endure extreme fear, abusive handling, open transport, and broken bones only to be sold for as little as twenty-five cents each.

Ironically, the first time battery-caged hens are able to flap their wings is when they struggle against rough handling as they are transported to the slaughterhouse. The first time they experience the outdoors is when they are sent to slaughter in open trucks. As future egg layers, female baby chicks are spared from death. Male baby chicks, having no value to the egg industry, are gassed, ground up, or suffocated. But at least they do not have to suffer life in a battery cage.

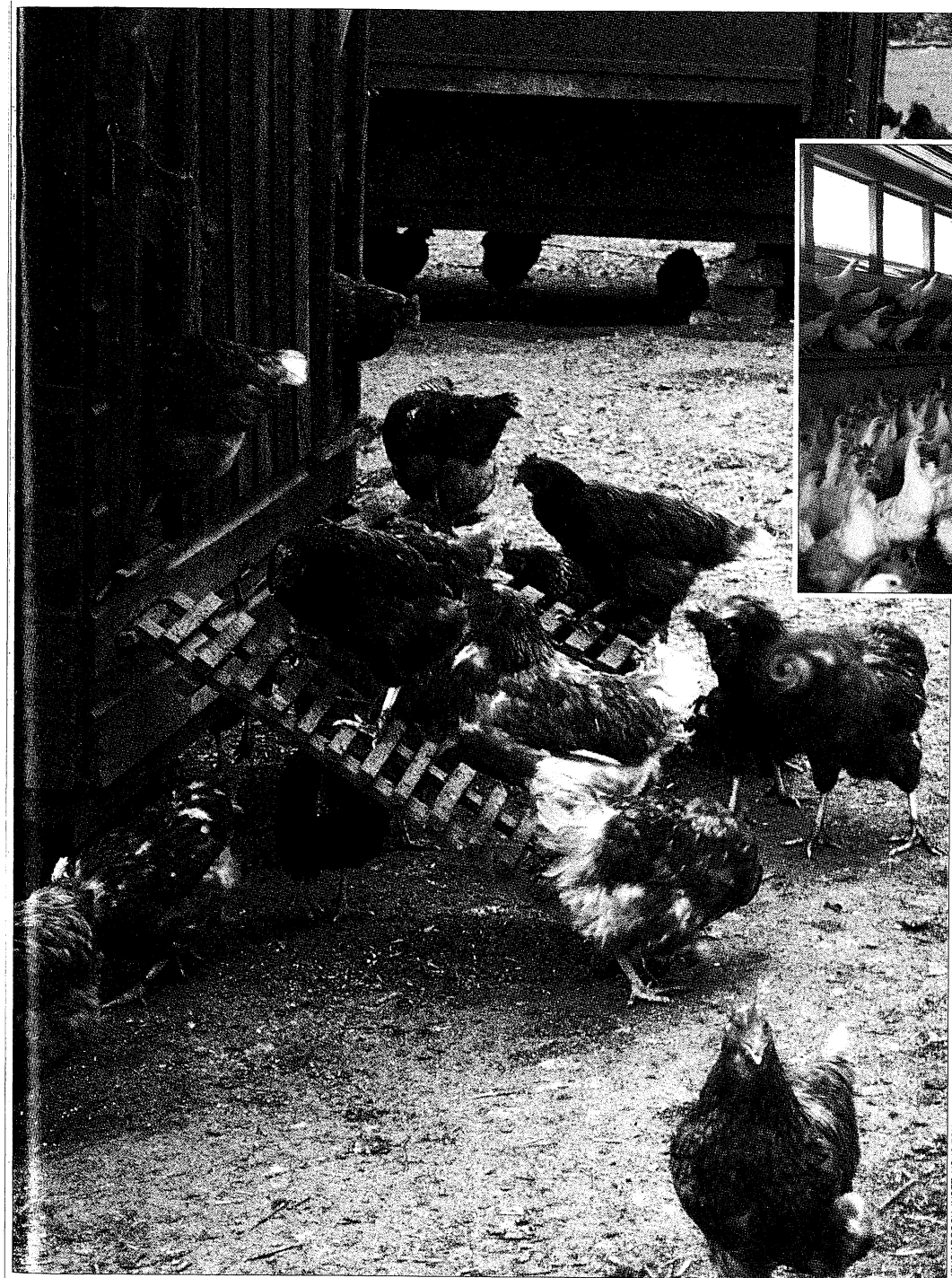
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Most of us grow up with images of barnyards where hens run about freely, happily clucking and pecking at the ground, and laying their eggs in straw-filled nests. Why hasn't the reality of the battery cage replaced this myth in advertising or in children's books?

The obvious answer is that showing us the reality of the hen's life would decrease egg sales. Consumers are misled by idyllic barnyard scenes with hens brooding in nests and chicks cheeping behind their attentive mothers. Just as objectionable are the ads portraying chickens as dumb—far from accurate or appreciative of the unique and complex behaviors chickens display.

The happy barnyard hen is not the only myth being perpetuated. America cherishes its heritage of family farms and wants to keep farmers and ranchers on the land. But in the last twelve years, 80 percent of U.S. egg producers have been driven out of business. This loss of farmers has paralleled the increase in the number of producers keeping more than a million birds, all in battery cages.

Confining hens to the battery cage is not the only cruelty inflicted in the poultry industry. The life of a poultry-processing worker is also one of misery. The line speeds at processing plants are so fast that many workers are forced to perform a repetitive motion on every other bird, one motion every two seconds! One in three workers suffers moderate to extreme pain



Rhode Island reds bustle contentedly outside henhouses equipped with ramps for easy access. On such free-range farms, laying hens can go outdoors, enjoy social contact, and eat and brood comfortably. Inset: unlike the laying hens restricted to crowded cages, these hens can move about and socialize. When consumers demand eggs from hens raised more humanely, retailers will respond.

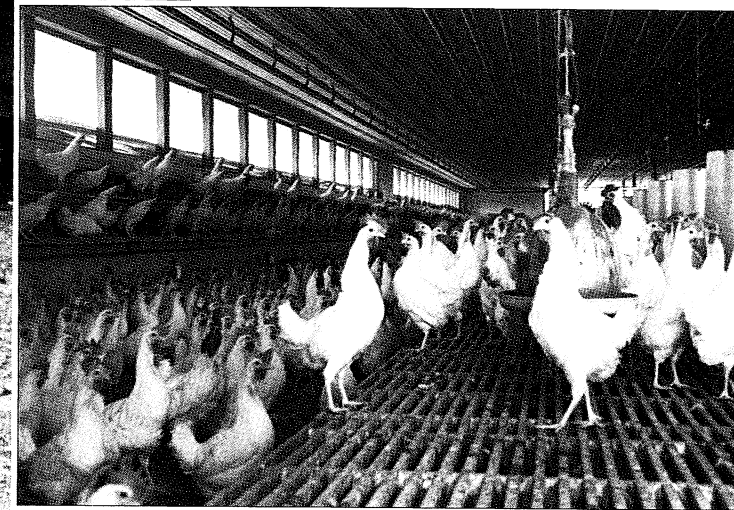
from musculoskeletal disorders, and every year 28,000 people lose their jobs or become disabled due to work-related injuries.

Our country is not only losing its independent family farmers, but the poultry industry is also treating people and animals like mere machines to be used until they are "spent." It's time to hold the industry accountable for its practices.

We, the consumers, are the key. How we spend our money at the grocery store directly influences how food is made and how animals are raised. Every time you reach for a carton of eggs from battery-caged hens, you are telling the grocer and the egg industry that you accept that product and the current treatment of laying hens. Instead for just pennies more a day, you can improve the lives of millions of

laying hens by picking up a carton of eggs from more humanely raised, uncaged hens.

Once the industry becomes aware of consumers' concern for hens and the de-



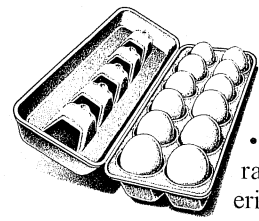
mand for eggs from uncaged birds, it will begin to buy from farmers who are producing eggs more humanely. Other farmers will be able to release their birds from cages and begin raising free-roaming birds.

Today these more humanely produced foods are not readily available in convenient locations such as local grocery stores. To confront this problem, The HSUS is mounting an "egg effort" in several major cities. We are joining forces with consumer, environmental, farmer, and animal-protection groups in each city to bring eggs from uncaged hens into grocery stores and to urge consumers to support the more humane egg farmers. At the same time, we will help consumers learn about the cruelties endured by battery-caged hens and how each of us can help give them a better life. After some 8,000 years of domestication and service to humankind, they deserve nothing less.

Our efforts to empower consumers to improve the lives of laying hens are part of a new HSUS nationwide campaign asking consumers to "shop with compassion." Because the battery cage is one of the most inhumane systems for raising animals, it is the first target of our campaign. No other farm animal endures such extreme physical confinement and crowding for as long as the laying hen does. We need your help to spread the word about battery-caged hens and to urge all egg users to switch to eggs from free-roaming hens. ■

Melanie Adcock, D.V.M., is HSUS director of farm animals.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP



- Ask your grocer to stock eggs from uncaged hens.
- Urge restaurants and bakeries to purchase eggs from uncaged

hens or to feature such eggs in one or two entrées or select baked goods.

- Send for our action packet, which describes how you can start an "egg effort" in your city and gives more information on how you can help to get laying hens out of battery cages.

Finally, consider these "three Rs" when you shop or eat out:

*Refine* your diet by purchasing eggs from humane egg-production systems. Look for the words *free-roaming*, *free-range*, *free-running*, or *uncaged* on the carton.

*Reduce* your consumption of eggs.

*Replace* eggs in your diet with nonanimal foods.

It is within our power as caring consumers to create a better future for farm animals, for humane farmers and ranchers, and for ourselves. Please begin today by joining us in our efforts to free laying hens from their cages. ■